



middle of nowhere

Discussion & Action Guide



participant
MEDIA



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“*Middle of Nowhere* is set in a world seldom seen, seldom regarded and often disrespected. A community made up of loved ones of the incarcerated. Mothers, daughters, sisters, wives. Millions of women of all types and creeds, of all ages and backgrounds. We feel these women and their experiences are worthy of exploration and illumination. They should no longer be ignored.”

– **Ava DuVernay**, writer/director, *Middle of Nowhere* (TakePart.com, September 12, 2012)

A Film that Inspires

Middle of Nowhere, the winner of the 2012 Sundance Film Festival Award for Directing, is an elegant and emotional drama chronicling a woman’s separation from her incarcerated husband and her journey to maintain her marriage and her identity. Staring into the hollow end of her husband Derek’s eight-year prison sentence, Ruby Sexton fights to support him on the inside and survive her own identity crisis on the outside. Through a chance encounter and a stunning betrayal that shakes her to the core, Ruby is propelled in new, and often frightening, directions of self-discovery.

Participant Media, filmmaker Ava DuVernay and the film’s distributor, African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement (AFFRM) have teamed up with TakePart the digital arm of Participant Media, on an important Social Action campaign entitled “*Wright to Call Home*,” named after Martha Wright who has been fighting a decade long battle to make calls from prison affordable for all families. Through alliances with the Center for Media Justice and the Media Action Grassroots Network, the “*Wright to Call Home*” campaign aims to keep families connected. Behind this Guide

This guide has been designed to encourage conversation about the rarely discussed community of women and families whose loved ones are incarcerated and to encourage action around the fight against predatory prison phone rates.



In this guide, we share stories of women who, like Ruby, experience the daily challenges of having a loved one who is incarcerated. We invite you to put yourself in their shoes. We provide sample discussion prompts to help nurture productive and fruitful discussion. We present facts about incarceration and prison phone profiteering. We’ve included information about how you can become involved with the “*Wright to Call Home*” campaign by signing a petition to the FCC on page 18. We’ve also organized additional resources that provide more context about the issues facing families of the incarcerated and a list of organizations involved in seeking justice.

In the end, we hope this guide serves as a valuable resource to spark conversation, understanding, and action.

Watch a video featuring the star of the film, Emayatzy Corinealdi, discuss the campaign: <http://www.takepart.com/middleofnowhere>.

Middle of Nowhere was jointly acquired by AaFFRM (the African American Film Festival Releasing Movement) and TakePart’s parent company, Participant Media.

“Classic filmmaking of a completely different sort.”

– **Kenneth Duran**, *Los Angeles Times* (January 31, 2012)



Film Synopsis

What happens when love takes you places you never thought you would go?

As Ruby (Emayatzy Corinealdi) rides a bus through the inner-city streets, she wills herself to push away memories that crowd her mind. Four years earlier, she was a vibrant medical student married to the love of her life, Derek (Omari Hardwick). Now, she makes her way to the maximum security prison on the outskirts of town. This is where her love now resides — behind coiled razor wire and forty-foot concrete walls.



As the couple stares into the hallow end of an eight-year prison sentence, Ruby must learn to live another life, one marked by shame and separation, by guilt and grief. Soon, her singular focus is to ensure Derek’s survival in his violent new environment. She drops out of school to maintain her marriage from beyond bars. She fights to support her husband on the inside and survive her own identity crisis on the outside.

But through a chance encounter and a stunning betrayal that shakes her to the core, Ruby is propelled in new and often frightening directions of self-discovery. As we chronicle her turbulent yet transformative journey, we witness the emergence of a broken woman made whole.



For more information about *Middle of Nowhere*, visit www.middlenowhere.com.



“We begin to understand how the stain of incarceration goes far beyond the imprisoned individual. But touches and torments their families and the communities they leave behind.”

– Ava DuVernay, writer/director, *Middle of Nowhere*

An Interview with Writer/Director Ava DuVernay

TakePart had an opportunity to talk with *Middle of Nowhere* writer/director Ava DuVernay about the inspiration behind this important film, her thoughts about incarceration, and what she hopes audiences take away from Ruby’s story.

TakePart: What is your elevator summary of *Middle of Nowhere*?

Ava DuVernay: *Middle of Nowhere* is a love story, a very complicated love story dealing with issues of identity and balance. There’s a woman named Ruby who’s happily married to her husband when he’s unexpectedly incarcerated. The separation causes her to have a bit of an identity crisis. As she makes her way through that, we follow a very intimate interior journey of a woman in search of herself.

TakePart: Why did you place your heroine in her particular dilemma?

Ava DuVernay: The backdrop of this character drama is a very seldom talked about community of women who wait—who wait for men who are incarcerated, whether it’s their father, brother, son or husband. Millions of women of all types and creeds and ages and backgrounds are going through this complex interior life that you never see addressed cinematically.

TakePart: What is the difference between *Middle of Nowhere* and a prison film?

Ava DuVernay: We’re in the prison waiting room. We never go back into where the incarcerated men live. We leave the waiting room with the woman, and we go out into her life. We begin to understand how the victims of incarceration are not just the prisoner; their families are also imprisoned. They’re very much jailed and confined —emotionally, spiritually, and physically — from their loved ones. So, I don’t see it as a prison film.



TakePart: What are some of the universal human experiences explored in *Middle of Nowhere*?

Ava DuVernay: This film is about lost love and how you deal with the emptiness, the loss of identity, and the loss of anchoring when the person who defined you is no longer in the picture. That's something every human being on this earth deals with, some of us better than others, whether it's loss through death, loss through a separation of some kind, loss through relationships that just break apart. In this case, the relationship is broken by incarceration.

TakePart: Speaking of shining a light, are there aspects of incarceration that mainstream America might be surprised to learn about?

Ava DuVernay: The plight of families who have loved ones incarcerated is not even talked about. Millions of people are affected by it in ways that you don't even think about. It costs \$1.90 to call Singapore from North Carolina for 15 minutes. The same call within North Carolina, if one of your calls is going into a prison, is almost \$18. It's almost \$300 to make a call to your loved one for 15 minutes once a week. \$300 is a lot of money for folks who live in at-risk communities.

When you really think about the fabric of a community, the trickledown effect that one person going to prison has on a family, the kind of depression that sets in, not just emotional depression, financial depression, all elements of that family life, the fabric, the thread starts to be pulled out. That affects the whole community, and eventually will come to your doorstep in some way or another.

TakePart: If you had legislative power, would you amend any laws concerning prison policy?

Ava DuVernay: If I could, I would abolish prisons. Literally. Factually, statistically, again and again for decades, it has been shown that incarceration does not improve rates of crime. It just doesn't. It's the wrong way to do it. Some folks see that as radical, but I'm a prison abolitionist. Incarceration is a moneymaking venture for some private companies. It doesn't help people. It doesn't help the communities. It doesn't help the victims. It doesn't truly help us grow as a society. The way that we punish is so arcane, outdated and just ridiculous that we're spending money to let people out of prison who have not been reformed or rehabilitated. It's a vicious, ridiculous cycle.

To read this entire interview, visit: <http://www.takepart.com/article/2012/09/12/middle-nowhere-director-if-i-could-i-would-abolish-prisons>.

“Today, I saw the award-winning film, *Middle of Nowhere*. It beautifully portrays the compelling story of a young family separated by distance due to incarceration, and it captures the struggles families face when their loved ones are serving sentences hundreds of miles from home.”

- **FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn** (Statement of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn on Meeting Petitioners Martha Wright and Ulandis Forte and Screening the Award-Winning Film *Middle of Nowhere*, September 24, 2012)

The Conversation

Middle of Nowhere provides a rich lens through which we can view universal issues that affect us all. Such richness lends itself to powerful discussion with friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. Whether you're hosting an after-viewing discussion, special event, or just interested in conversing about the layered story that the film presents, below you'll find some suggested discussion prompts to engage in meaningful conversation about the film and beyond.

Starting the Discussion

- What are your initial thoughts about the film? How did it make you feel? What thoughts did it leave you with?
- Do you know anyone who has been incarcerated? How did your relationship with that person change during the incarceration? What challenges did you face, if any, as a result of the incarceration?
- How is *Middle of Nowhere* a different look at incarceration than you've seen in the past?

Left Behind

- How would you describe Ruby? Did she remind you of any women in your life? Over the course of the film, she goes through a journey of growth and understanding. How do you think she changed from the beginning of the film to the end? Could you relate to any parts of her journey? Why or why not?
- Ruby made many sacrifices, including dropping out of medical school, in an effort to pour herself into her marriage. She also worked overtime to afford her husband's legal fees and to help pay child support for his daughter. Have you ever considered the sacrifices that women with incarcerated loved ones have to make? If you were in Ruby's shoes, would you have done anything differently? If so, what and why?
- Ruby faced criticism from her mother who believed that Ruby was wasting her time waiting for her husband to be released from prison. Many women with incarcerated loved ones face the same type of criticism and judgments. Why do you think this is the case? What can be done to eliminate this type of stigma?
- Why do you think that stories of women and families of the incarcerated aren't highlighted more?
- Did you know that you have the ability to affect change on this matter?

Incarceration

- *Middle of Nowhere* rarely ventured into the prison except for when Ruby visited her husband Derek. What do you think Derek was experiencing during his prison sentence? What challenges did he face?
- In an interview, writer/director Ava DuVernay said that she would abolish prisons if she could because in her opinion they're an ineffective form of punishment that in the end, do not help us grow as a society. Do you agree or disagree and why? What do you think about the current prison system in the United States?
- Black men are disproportionately incarcerated when compared to other ethnic groups. Why do you think this is the case? How do you think the high rate of incarceration impacts Black families and the Black community overall?

- One way that families of the incarcerated are exploited is through predatory phone practices. In what ways do high phone rates affect the relationships between families and their incarcerated loved ones? How would you feel if you were unable to communicate with a loved one because you couldn't afford to talk to them on the telephone?
- In addition to lowering recidivism rates, what do you think are other benefits of keeping inmates connected to family and friends on the outside?

Being in the Middle of Nowhere

- Brian, the bus driver on Ruby's route who pursued her romantically, represented something new and different. What were the considerations of becoming involved with Brian? What are some of the challenges that wives of incarcerated men face involving companionship and maintaining a marriage?
- Time is a very present theme in the film and in the lives of families of the incarcerated. How did Ruby deal with time in the film? In what ways do you think time affects families with loved ones in prison?
- The title of *Middle of Nowhere* describes Ruby's current state as the result of her husband's incarceration. It also symbolizes the physical location of the prison where her husband was incarcerated and where she had to travel to see him. What role do you think distance — including physical and emotional — plays in the relationship between families and their incarcerated loved ones?
- How were Ruby and the other characters in the film caught in the middle of nowhere?
- Ruby's sister Rosie and her mother Ruth were also trapped by expectations and realities. How would you describe the relationship between the three women? Could you relate to their struggles to communicate and understand one another?
- Define freedom.

Forward Movement

- In the end, do you think that Ruby made the right decision for herself and her marriage?
- What are ways that families of the incarcerated can be helped to alleviate some of the daily pressures that they face?
- What are ways to support independent films like *Middle of Nowhere* that have important messages?



“Like Ruby, I was married six years the day I saw the movie. Like Ruby, my big pretty house was gone at my husband’s actions. Like Ruby, I was in school and had dreams. Like Ruby, I will not sit and wait. I will strive and thrive.”

– **Bethany**, wife of an incarcerated man and mother of two

Step into Their Shoes

The families of the incarcerated are often invisible victims of the criminal justice system. These families try so hard to be present for a loved one while they are in prison but often face enormous obstacles when trying to keep in touch. Being so far away, phone calls are often the best option but in many cases, the high costs of calling home prohibit families from staying connected. In addition, phone calls help to secure parole, employment and other elements needed to prepare those incarcerated for life outside. Being connected means there is a social network that is concerned with an offender’s rehabilitation and reentry back into the world.

Three real life Rubys share their personal stories of fighting to stay in touch with loved ones who are incarcerated and their struggles to keep their families connected. After each story, we invite you to put yourself in their shoes — another opportunity to initiate group and community conversation.

Meet Sandra Oakland, CA Sister of an incarcerated man

Sandra, a mother of two, has firsthand experience struggling with the difficulties of keeping in touch when a family member is in prison.

Sandra’s brother has been in prison for the past thirty years and she believes that being connected to loved ones in prison is vitally important. But the cost of speaking to her brother is too expensive. She chooses to save her money and visit him instead. “[It’s] critical to stay in contact,” Sandra says. “It keeps him going . . . knowing that someone cares about him.” Most importantly for Sandra, she also needs that connection. “[It’s] very important that he calls. That’s my big brother. You need to run something by him or you need advice. I grew up with no father and my mother died. Think about families and kids who can’t talk to their dad and moms.”

Moreover, Sandra knows firsthand what it feels like to be behind bars when she was incarcerated. She has a daughter that she did not speak to for two years due to the high phone cost. She preferred for her daughter to spend the money on her grandkids than herself. “I did not want her to make the choice. ‘I will pay for this phone call and not buy John Jr. his cleats.’ I was lonely, sad and constantly stressed about it.”

Sandra hopes people will become aware of the gross abuse perpetrated by the prison telephone industry. “It can happen to anyone,” she says. “They haven’t experienced it. I hope they don’t. In case they do, they need to make sure this company is regulated.”

Put yourself in Sandra’s shoes. How would you handle being unable to afford to call a loved one in prison? If you were incarcerated, how would you handle not speaking to your daughter for two years because it was too costly? What options would you have? What options would your daughter have?

Meet Bethany
Washington, D.C. area
Wife of an incarcerated man and mother of two

Bethany sees herself in Ruby. Here, she shares the daily challenges raising children on her own while trying to maintain her marriage from behind bars.

My husband caused a car accident while drunk driving after happy hour with his company one sunny summer night. The person he hit was on a bicycle and did not survive the horrible impact. We are all broken over this tragedy. This was my husband's fault, and he has never complained about his punishment to this moment. We understand he is where he should be after the events of that night. Through therapy I have been able to learn different coping skills and parenting skills to help with the current situation.

We live outside D.C. in a Maryland suburb with my two sons (ages 5 and 10). Initially when I started visiting my husband once a week for one hour with my children, I felt fortunate that we had support around us, but over the past twenty-one months, the time has worn on us emotionally and financially.

The kids and I have moved our home several times while trying to find the right place to live while on one income. We were forced to sell our beautiful home; we have another home that will more than likely go to foreclosure. I now rent an apartment closer to those who can offer help. The attorney bill was paid for in full and it was all we had saved. Alone, after my husband was sentenced, I began to rebuild. There were school bills, day care bills, rent and yes, very expensive phone bills and gas bills and legal bills surrounding my husband's choices.

Like Ruby, I was married six years the day I saw the movie. Like Ruby, my big, pretty house was gone at my husband's actions. Like Ruby, I was in school and had dreams. Like Ruby, I will not sit and wait. I will strive and thrive. More than one person lost their life that night, and I will not watch mine waste away.

I spoke with a group of local high school students after they were in trouble for underage drinking, and that had me thinking bigger picture. I can talk to people about this experience and help them learn. I want to help the women and children I see each week. Some need help with every day necessities like groceries and gas money and others need assistance in major ways.

I do not live in a community where incarceration is prevalent. This adjustment has been so difficult and I am so worried about my children and what this separation means to them. My five-year-old asks for his father almost every day, still as we approach the two-year mark of the day he went away. All I can do is raise my sons to be as honest and as careful as possible. The material "things" no longer matter and I am sorry that one day they did. Nothing will bring us back and we are only focused on looking forward but we are not there yet. My family can and will not forget that day that our lives changed, and my husband changed another family's life forever, too. He will serve his time and hopefully come home so we can rebuild. For now, my children need to have clear communication with him. They are victims, too, and the phone is the only way to keep that connection.

Put yourself in Bethany's shoes. How would you handle having to assume the financial burden resulting from your husband's incarceration? What would you tell your children about how their lives will change? How would you help them to maintain a relationship with their father? Where could you get help or support? Would you find ways to help others?

Meet Patrisse
Los Angeles, CA
Sister of an incarcerated man

The issue of predatory prison phone rates is an important issue for Patrisse's family. Her brother was incarcerated in California for six years. Maintaining contact with her brother was a necessity. He suffers from mental health issues. Patrisse and her mother were worried about his condition on the inside. Between the costs of the calls, books, buying food, and more, they had to choose how they would divide their expenses for her brother.

If they could afford to accept the phone call, her brother would call three to four times a week. If not, they would wait a month and gather money. In addition to the high costs of accepting these calls, the calls would constantly drop. Sometimes three calls dropped. By the end of the third call their fifteen minutes were up.

"These companies make it hard and expensive to maintain contact with a loved one," says Patrisse. "Families are forced to pay fees. It's stressful and financially burdensome. Moreover, it's humiliating to tell a family member that there is no money to accept their call. The incarcerated have no agency. It falls on the family to do a lot of the work on the outside. [It] leaves you hopeless and makes me wonder if the goal is to break families up."

Put yourself in Patrisse's shoes. How would you handle the stress of worrying about your brother who suffers from mental issues? What are your options to know of his condition in prison? How would you work with your family to manage the financial strain?

To view videos featuring real stories about those affected by this issue, visit:
www.takepart.com/middleofnowhere.



“Connecting husbands to wives, parents to children, and grandparents to grandchildren should be a national priority because these tangible means of communicating not only will help these families keep in contact, but the general society benefits overall, as studies show that prisoners are less likely to reoffend if they are able to maintain these relationships with their loved ones.”

- **FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn** (Statement of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn on Meeting Petitioners Martha Wright and Ulandis Forte and Screening the Award-Winning Film *Middle of Nowhere*, September 24, 2012)

Know the Facts

The Face of Incarceration

In 2010, the United States had the highest incarceration rate in the world.

In 2011, 2.3 million people were incarcerated.

- 1 in every 36 Latino men
- 1 in every 25 Native American adults
- 1 in 9 Black men aged 20–35

In 2011, there were 2.7 million children with an incarcerated parent.

- 1 in 57 white children
- 1 in 28 Latino children
- 1 in 9 Black children

Black men face a 32 percent chance that they will be incarcerated at some point during their lifetime. Hispanic males face a 17 percent chance, while white men are only 6 percent likely to serve time in prison.

In 2010, 38 percent of incarcerated people were Black, 32 percent white, and 22 percent Hispanic.

In 2010, males accounted for 93 percent of the U.S. prison population.

Nearly half of fathers who are incarcerated are Black and nearly half of mothers who are incarcerated are white.

The Impact of Incarceration on Wives and Children

Wives of incarcerated men are often expected to assume the roles of their husbands and as a result, experience significant stress and guilt.

The two most challenging issues that wives of incarcerated men face are raising children alone and financial problems.

Women with incarcerated loved ones experience many of the same consequences of being incarcerated including restricted rights, diminished resources, and marginalization.

The impact of stigma associated with incarceration can be so significant that many family members isolate themselves, often from those who could offer support.

A significant number of minor children with an incarcerated parent will turn 18 while their parent is incarcerated.

Nearly 50 percent of parents incarcerated in state prisons provided the primary financial support for their minor children.

Behind Predatory Prison Phone Rates

To speak with a loved one in prison costs up to 24 times more than a normal call.

Rates vary widely nationwide, up to more than \$18 for a 15-minute long-distance call.

Phone profiteering abuse is not only widespread in jails, but also juvenile facilities, and immigration detention centers.

Low-income families and communities of color are hit hardest by predatory phone rates.

Prison call rates have risen as phone costs for the general public have dropped.

The Impact

Strong family ties are key factors in successful parole and return to the community, reducing homelessness, unemployment, crime, and drug abuse after release.

Corrections officials cite phone access as essential for boosting morale and positive motivation among the incarcerated, especially those who are out of state, far from family.

The growing security problem of illegal cell phones in prisons is made worse by excessive rates for prison calls.

Corporate Profits and Government Kickbacks

Up to 60 percent of the price of a prison phone call is not for the cost of the service but goes directly to “commissions” for prison agencies. For state prisons alone, these kickbacks add up to an annual \$152 million taken from mostly low-income families.

85 percent of state prison systems receive kickback payments from telephone service providers. Where kickbacks have been banned, prices dropped by 30-80 percent.

Many systems require collect calls to a landline, unnecessarily excluding more affordable technologies such as debit cards, calls to cells, and Internet phones.

Some Reduction, But Not Enough

After decades of grassroots campaigns from families of people in prison, eight states have reduced the cost of state prison calls by banning kickbacks.

The Federal Communications Commission is years overdue to act on the Wright Petition, which would lower rates nationwide and help repair the lack of regulation.

Sources:

The Sentencing Project; Bureau of Justice Statistics; “Criminal Charges: Fighting for Your Right to Call Home,” Center for Media Justice; Johnna Christian, “Riding the Bus: Barriers to Prison Visitation and Family Management Strategies,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, February 2005: 31-48.

FAMILIES PAYING THE PRICE: The High Cost of Prison Phone Calls

Families are being charged exorbitantly high phone rates when trying to connect with their loved ones in prison.

WHO IS AFFECTED WHEN SOMEONE GOES TO PRISON?



The families of the **2.2 million** people currently incarcerated.

Families of prisoners are largely members of economically **vulnerable communities**.



Over **2.7 million children** have at least one parent in prison.



More than **half** of prisoners with children live more than **100 miles** from where they lived before prison.

10% of prisoners with children live more than **500 miles** away from where they lived before prison.

THE SKY-HIGH COST OF KEEPING IN TOUCH

Two Ways Prisoners Can Make Calls



MAKE A COLLECT CALL.



USE A DEBIT CARD ISSUED BY THE PRISON.

Debit cards are usually the slightly cheaper option, but they're not available in all states, and the prisoner must have access to immediate funds.

It can cost families more than \$18 for a 15-minute phone call. Speaking once a week for 1 hour costs over \$280 a month.

TOTAL \$362 MILLION
IN ANNUAL GROSS REVENUE TO STATE PRISON SYSTEMS DUE TO THIS PREDATORY PRACTICE.

WHY THIS MATTERS

In 2007, Martha Wright and fellow families of prisoners filed a petition that requested the FCC establish rates for all interstate inmate calling services that are no higher than **\$0.25 per minute**. The petition was supported by the Center for Constitutional Rights, Prison Legal News, and Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE) and is currently before the FCC.

What Happens if the Wright Petition Is Passed?

When prisoners maintain contact with their family...

- 

1 They are less likely to return to prison.
- 

2 It facilitates reentry and reintegration into the community.
- 

3 They have better access to housing and financial assistance.
- 

4 Family ties are stronger.
- 

5 They are more likely to become contributing community members of society.
- 

6 It prevents the termination of parental rights.
- 

7 And parole authorities look favorably on inmates who have relations with family.

HOLD THE PHONE! Why Are Phone Calls So Expensive?

- 1** The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has **NOT REGULATED** prison phone rate systems.
- 2** Once a private phone company wins a contract with a prison, there is **NO COMPETITION**, and they are the only provider.
- 3** States require a certain percentage of the cost of a phone call (e.g. **A KICKBACK**).
- 4** Companies **INFLATE PHONE RATES** to cover the cost of the kickback and still make a profit.

AND IT GETS WORSE
Some states have a connection fee of \$3 or more when you make a call—regardless of the length of the call and in addition to the per-minute fee. If the connection is lost and you have to dial again, the connection fee is charged **EVERY TIME**.

States Without Kickbacks

Seven states and the District of Columbia have stopped accepting kickbacks.



Alaska is the only state where prisoners can make a local collect call for free.

YOU CAN HELP EVERY FAMILY HAVE THE WRIGHT TO CALL HOME.

URGE THE FCC TO PASS THE WRIGHT PETITION TODAY.

SOURCES: SENTENCING PROJECT'S PRISONPHONE NOTICE AND A PRISONER'S GUIDE TO CALLING HOME; CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

WWW.TAKEPART.COM/MIDDLEOFNOWHERE




INFOGRAPHIC DESIGN BY COLUMN FIVE

“It is the Commission’s responsibility to ensure that interstate phone rates are just and reasonable, and we have an obligation to ensure that basic, affordable phone service is available to all Americans, including low-income consumers.”

– **FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn** (Statement of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn on Meeting Petitioners Martha Wright and Ulandis Forte and Screening the Award-Winning Film *Middle of Nowhere*, September 24, 2012)

Action in Action

Will Middle of Nowhere Convince the FCC to Do the Wright Thing on Prison Phone Rates? FCC holds ‘unprecedented’ hearings and film screening to evaluate predatory price gouging.

TakePart.com, September 21, 2012

By Matthew Fleischer

When Martha Wright’s grandson Ulandis Forte was convicted of murder in his native Washington, D.C., Martha vowed that, despite his transgression, she was going to do everything in her power to keep in touch with him and steer him on a path to redemption.

Blind and living on a small pension, Wright spoke to her grandson multiple times per week over the phone, and they exchanged letters whenever possible.

Then, suddenly, things changed.

After his conviction, Forte was sent — as all D.C. felons were at the time — to a municipal correctional facility one hour outside of the city in Lorton, Virginia: “A notorious hellhole,” according to Deborah Golden, staff attorney for the D.C. Prisoners’ Project and a member of the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs.

The Lorton facility was so troubled in the late’90s that prison officials began filtering inmates into federal penitentiaries across the country. Lorton was eventually closed.

Forte was among those inmates transferred to a series of facilities run by Corrections Corporation of America. First he went to New Mexico, then Arizona, then Ohio. The distance made visitation impossible for his grandmother, Martha Wright. Additionally, it only took one phone bill for Wright to realize that, not only could she not visit her grandson, she could barely afford to speak with him.

Through CCA’s privatized phone system, a five-minute call with her grandson could wind up costing upward of \$18.

“She had to scrimp and save to take his calls twice a week,” says Golden of the D.C. Prisoners’ Project. “She had to pick between medication and talking to him. Or her heat and talking to him. Or food. She was extraordinarily committed to being there for him.”

In 2000, Wright and several others fed up with being gouged on exorbitant private prison phone rates sued Corrections Corporation of America in federal court. The case, however, stalled when the judge claimed to lack the authority to determine what constituted gouging.

“The judge ruled she couldn’t rule until the FCC made a decision about what qualifies as fair phone rates,” Golden tells TakePart. The D.C. Prisoners’ Project is representing Wright in her lawsuit. “However, the FCC doesn’t have any timeline. You can petition them for a ruling, but there is nothing you can do to force them to act upon those petitions. Nothing has happened [in the Wright case] for 10 years.”

The FCC has agreed to hold an ex-parte hearing to consider the impact of high phone rates on the families of imprisoned individuals.

Along with live testimony from Wright and others with relatives inside prison walls, the FCC officials will view *Middle of Nowhere*, a feature film written and directed by Ava DuVernay about a woman’s struggle to maintain her relationship with her incarcerated husband.

“To see an artistic representation of what it means to be cut off from your loved ones is very unprecedented,” says Golden. “We are very hopeful this will spur action.”

There is no guarantee the hearing will compel the FCC to take action. Nonetheless, the meeting is a sign of hope for relatives of the incarcerated, trying to keep their families together.

According to Golden, Martha Wright and her grandson Ulandis Forte are thrilled that their long legal battle may finally approach resolution.

“Both of them knew this case was ongoing, but they thought it no longer had a chance,” says Golden. “Ulandis is in a halfway house now. He’s almost done with his sentence. So this case no longer directly affects them. But when we called them last week to let them know the FCC wanted to hear from both of them, they were really excited. It’s too late to make it better for them. But it can make it better for the people who come after them.”

Statement from FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn September 24, 2012

“Today, I saw the award-winning film, *Middle of Nowhere*. It beautifully portrays the compelling story of a young family separated by distance due to incarceration, and it captures the struggles families face when their loved ones are serving sentences hundreds of miles from home. Staying connected is challenging. Traveling for in-person visits is time consuming, often expensive, and such hardships are most acute for low-income families who struggle to make ends meet. So access to low-cost phone service options should be part of the answer to this family divide. Connecting husbands to wives, parents to children, and grandparents and grandchildren to each other should be a national priority because these tangible means of communicating not only will help these families keep in contact, but the general society benefits overall, as studies show that prisoners are less likely to reoffend if they are able to maintain these relationships.

I also had the opportunity to meet Mrs. Martha Wright and her grandson, Mr. Ulandis Forte, who filed a petition with the FCC almost ten years ago to request that the Commission help make interstate long distance rates for inmates and their families affordable. The good news is that the familial bond between Mrs. Wright and her grandson was not broken by exorbitant prison payphone rates. Mr. Forte has paid his debt to society, was recently released from prison, and they are now reunited. But what this family has not done is stop fighting for all of the others who remain desperate to hear the voices of their incarcerated loved ones on a regular basis. They know what it’s like when you can’t afford to make even a short call, let alone the more important ones containing the missing news that all families want to share — such as hearing your child’s first words or describing their first academic highlight or great sports feat. And let us not minimize the power behind simply hearing and expressing those three words, ‘I love you.’

I am uplifted that both political parties during their respective conventions this summer reiterated their commitments to policies that will reduce the recidivism rate in our nation, and I am further energized in that this agency also has a role to play in doing just that. It is the Commission’s responsibility to ensure that interstate phone rates are just and reasonable, and we have an obligation to ensure that basic, affordable phone service is available to all Americans, including low-income consumers. Incarcerated individuals and their loved ones should not be the exceptions here, and as watchdogs of the public interest, this Commission must and should act expeditiously. It is time for us to do the right thing and answer the Wright Petition.”

To read a full statement from FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn on screening *Middle of Nowhere* and meeting Martha Wright, visit: http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2012/db0924/DOC-316432A1.pdf.

“To see an artistic representation of what it means to be cut off from your loved ones is very unprecedented. We are hopeful this will spur action.”

- **Deborah Golden**, staff attorney for the D.C. Prisoners' Project
(TakePart.com, September 21, 2012)

The Campaign

WRIGHT TO CALL HOME: End Predatory Prison Phone Rates

The “Wright to Call Home” campaign centers on urging the Federal Communications Commission to pass the Wright petition, named after Martha Wright, who has been fighting a decade long battle to make prison phone calls affordable for all families. The FCC is in charge of regulating telephone communications in the United States and has the power to end predatory prison phone rates.

It can cost a mom more than \$18 for a 15-minute phone call with her son in prison and families are forced to pay these excessive rates or give up staying connected. Our communities urgently need federal oversight of interstate prison phone call rates. You can help ensure families stay connected by taking action below.

Families are paying the price. Together, we can ensure that they no longer have to.

Start Now. Take Part.

Sign the Petition. You can be directly involved in helping to end predatory prison phone rates and help families stay connected. On the following page of this guide, we've included the full text of the petition to FCC Chairman Genachowski and instructions about how to sign it.

Share the Campaign and the Film. When voices come together, change happens. Share the “Wright to Call Home” campaign with your personal and social networks. We encourage you to post and tweet facts about the campaign and prison phone rates. Follow TakePart on Twitter ([@takepart](#)) for important updates and use hashtag #middlenowhere to follow the conversation.

You can also share your thoughts about *Middle of Nowhere* with friends, family, and colleagues and encourage others to download this guide. Join the discussion on *Middle of Nowhere*'s Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/middleofnowheremovie) and follow the film on Twitter ([@middlenowhere](#)).

Share Your Story. Do you have a personal story about maintaining a relationship with a loved one in prison or the challenges of staying in touch? TakePart is gathering personal stories to share widely in efforts to highlight the impact of incarceration on families. You can email your story to middleofnowhere@takepart.com. Please include contact information.

Host an Event. Spread the power of film and organize an informal gathering or action meeting to discuss the film and consider additional ways to fight against predatory prison phone rates or other related issues.

For more information about the “Wright to Call Home” campaign, visit <http://www.takepart.com/middleofnowhere/takeaction>.

Petition to the FCC

Below is the full text of the petition that will be sent to FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski to end predatory phone prison rates. To sign it, complete the informational card beneath the letter and mail it to Participant Media at the address provided.

Dear Chairman Genachowski,

Our communities urgently need federal oversight of interstate prison phone call rates to ensure fair costs for friends and families who have loved ones in prison.

Most companies with contracts to provide phone services to prisons charge extraordinarily high phone rates. It can cost a mom more than \$18 for a 15-minute phone call with her son in prison. Families are forced to pay these excessive rates or give up staying connected. Our communities are harmed because prisoners who are unable to maintain family ties, are less likely to succeed post-release. Also, an inmates' ability to stay in contact with family members by phone is an effective and cost-efficient way to drastically reduce the chances of recidivism. There are over 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States with 40% at risk of returning to prison, and our epidemic of incarceration costs taxpayers .4 billion a year. Make this more affordable for everyone — the taxpayers and the families — by regulating interstate prison phone call rates now.

Approve the Wright Petition, CC Docket No. 96-128, which requests the FCC to establish benchmark rates for all interstate inmate calling services no higher than 0.25 per minute for collect calls. The Wright Petition, CC Docket No. 96-128, has been pending before the FCC for 8 years. Why are we waiting act on this important issue?

Sincerely,

The Undersigned

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|-----------------|-----------|-------|--------------|-----|-----------|
| First Name | Last Name | Email | Organization | | |
| Mailing Address | | City | State | Zip | Comments? |
| First Name | Last Name | Email | Organization | | |
| Mailing Address | | City | State | Zip | Comments? |
| First Name | Last Name | Email | Organization | | |
| Mailing Address | | City | State | Zip | Comments? |
| First Name | Last Name | Email | Organization | | |
| Mailing Address | | City | State | Zip | Comments? |

Please mail to: Participant Media, Attn: Social Action Department, 331 N Foothill Road, 3rd floor, Beverly Hills, CA 90210. This letter will be sent on your behalf to FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski; signers will be added to our campaign list.

Resources

Middle of Nowhere Resources

For more information about the “Wright to Call Home” Campaign, visit:
www.takepart.com/middleofnowhere.

To join the discussion about *Middle of Nowhere* and learn more about the film, visit:
www.middlenowhere.com
www.twitter.com/middlenowhere
www.facebook.com/middleofnowheremovie

To watch the film trailer and other videos from the campaign visit:
www.middlenowhere.com.

To learn about other films released by AaFFRM as well as its education and community efforts, visit: www.affrm.com.

Additional Resources

A New Way of Life Project | www.anewwayoflife.org

An organization that provides housing and support services to formerly incarcerated women in South Central Los Angeles, facilitating a successful transition back to community life.

The Campaign for Prison Phone Justice | www.phonejustice.org

A national campaign that is challenging prison phone kickbacks and the United States prison telephone industry.

Center for Constitutional Rights | www.ccrjustice.org

Nonprofit legal and educational organization dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Center for Media Justice | www.centerformediajustice.org

A national movement building intermediary that creates media and cultural conditions to strengthen movements for racial justice, economic equity, and human rights.

Center for Restorative Justice Works | www.crjw.us

A conduit to assist and accompany children, families and communities in crossing over the barriers that separate them from people in prison.

ColorofChange.org | www.colorofchange.org

An online advocacy organization whose goal is to empower its members — Black Americans and allies — to make government more responsive to the concerns of Black Americans and to bring about positive political and social change for everyone.

Critical Resistance | www.criticalresistance.org

A national organization dedicated to opposing the expansion of the prison industrial complex.

CURE National | www.curenational.org

Citizens United for Rehabilitation is an international grassroots criminal justice reform organization.

Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Books Not Bars

www.ellabakercenter.org/our-work/books-not-bars

The center organizes the largest network of families of incarcerated youth and champions alternatives to California’s costly, broken prison system.

Free Press | www.freepress.net

Nationwide movement to change media and technology policies, promote the public interest, and strengthen democracy.

Friends Outside | www.friendsoutside.org

Child and family advocate helping families, children and incarcerated individuals cope with the trauma of arrest and incarceration.

Fortune Society | www.fortunesociety.org

Nonprofit social service and advocacy organization that supports successful reentry from prison and promotes alternatives to incarceration.

Human Rights Defense Center | www.humanrightsdefensecenter.org/

A nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of the human rights of those detained against their will by the United States government and its agents.

Justice for Families | <http://www.justice4families.org>

A national bipartisan movement for justice reinvestment — the reallocation of government resources away from mass incarceration and toward investment in families and communities.

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights | www.civilrights.org

A coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations to promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States.

MAG-Net | www.mag-net.org

A local-to-local advocacy network of grassroots community organizations working together for media change to end poverty, eliminate racism, and ensure human rights.

Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Society | www.mothersofinmates.org

A support group for the incarcerated and their families.

National Council of La Raza | www.nclr.org

A civil rights and advocacy organization that works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans.

**National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
www.fcnetwork.org/**

The Family and Corrections Network (NRCCFI at FCN) is the oldest organization in the U.S. focused on *children and families of the incarcerated* and programs that serve them.

The Osbourne Association | www.osborneny.org

An organization that offers opportunities for individuals who have been in conflict with the law to transform their lives through innovative, effective, and replicable programs that serve the community by reducing crime and its human and economic costs.

Prison Legal News | www.prisonlegalnews.org

An independent monthly magazine that provides a cutting edge review and analysis of prisoner rights, court rulings and news.

PrisonTalk | www.prisontalk.com

Prisoner and family support information chat forums.

Public Knowledge | www.publicknowledge.org

An organization that preserves the openness of the Internet and the public's access to knowledge, promotes creativity through balanced copyright, and upholds and protects the rights of consumers to use innovative technology lawfully.

The Sentencing Project | www.sentencingproject.org

An organization that works for a fair and effective U.S. criminal justice system by promoting reforms in sentencing policy, addressing unjust racial disparities and practices, and advocating for alternatives to incarceration.

Vera Institute of Justice | www.vera.org

Vera's Center on Sentencing and Corrections works with government leaders to advance

criminal justice policies that promote fairness, protect public safety, and ensure that resources are used efficiently.

Washington Lawyers' Committee | www.washlaw.org

A committee that mobilizes the resources of the private bar to address issues of civil rights violations and poverty in the community.

Women's Prison Association | www.wpaonline.org

An advocacy organization committed to helping women with criminal justice histories see new possibilities for themselves.

Working Narratives | www.workingnarratives.org

A nonprofit dedicated to building the "narrative strategies" of social justice movements at the intersection of the arts, technology, and public policy.



Credits

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About AaFFRM | www.affrm.com

AaFFRM is the theatrical distribution entity powered by the nation's top Black film organizations. The collective activates quality Black independent films with simultaneous theatrical engagements in select cities.

About Participant Media | www.participantmedia.com

Participant Media believes that a good story well told can truly make a difference in how one sees the world. Whether it is a feature film, documentary or other form of media, Participant exists to tell compelling, entertaining stories that also create awareness of the real issues that shape our lives.

The company seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference. To facilitate this, Participant creates specific social action campaigns for each film and documentary designed to give a voice to issues that resonate in the films. Participant teams with social sector organizations, nonprofits and corporations who are committed to creating an open forum for discussion, education — and who can, with Participant, offer specific ways for audience members to get involved. These include action kits, screening programs, educational curriculums and classes, house parties, seminars, panels and other activities and ongoing “legacy” programs that are updated and revised to continue beyond the film's domestic and international theatrical, DVD and television windows. To date, Participant has developed active, working relationships with 600 nonprofits, which collectively have the potential of reaching over 75 million people.

About TakePart | www.takepart.com

Founded in 2008, TakePart is an interactive publisher and the digital arm of Participant Media, the company responsible for award-winning films such as *An Inconvenient Truth*; *Food, Inc.*; *Waiting for Superman*; *Charlie Wilson's War*; *Contagion* and *The Help*. Participant's ethos that “a story well told can change the world” is the driving force behind TakePart's daily mission: To inspire and accelerate social change by connecting compelling content to social action.

About Pride Collaborative | www.pridecollaborative.com

Pride Collaborative is a boutique media and communications firm that connects the dots between storytelling, content strategy, digital media, and offline engagement to help media properties, organizations, and brands amplify messages, broaden audiences, and affect meaningful change.